

Shanna Swendson

Criminal Enchantment



An Enchanted Inc. Short Story

Criminal Enchantment

A Short Story Set in the World of Enchanted, Inc.

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Foreword

Before Katie met Owen, the Magic, Spells, and Illusions, Inc., team already had a job to do.

There's spellcasting skullduggery at work in Manhattan, and Sam the gargoyle is on the case. This time, the shady spells look awfully familiar, like the work of outcast wizard Phelan Idris. There's just no real evidence of his involvement, and without that, the MSI team can't do anything to stop him from wreaking magical havoc in the city. To track the criminal enchantments back to their source, Sam will have to rally his security gargoyle pals, do some old-fashioned sleuthing, and keep his wizard friend Owen Palmer focused on the case instead of on that cute girl he spotted at the bookstore.

See the events that lead up to the beginning of *Enchanted, Inc.* in this Enchanted Universe novelette.

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Criminal Enchantment

A flicker of motion caught my eye, so I swooped down to take a closer look. If I wasn't mistaken—and I almost never was—someone was using magic in a very bad way. The spell was tinged with darkness and, even worse, it was being used to cause harm, which is a major no-no in the magical world. Most pathetic of all was that it was being used to cause *petty* harm. I mean, if you're gonna shoplift from a deli, gut it up and stuff the goods under a baggy sweater. Using magic to deceive the proprietor into thinking you're not walkin' out with an armload of junk food is just lame.

Fortunately, lame was the operative word, as this loser didn't know what he was doing. It was a sloppy spell, so it didn't take too much for me to disrupt it. As I flew off, I heard the deli owner screaming at the jerk and taking back all his potato chips. Good for him. For me, it was just part of the job. No need to stick around to take credit for foiling the scam.

The name's Sam. I'm a gargoyle, and I fight crime.

Yeah, back in the day my people mostly just protected churches, but you gotta keep up with the times, and all that church protecting made us pretty darn good at protecting other things. My main job is as chief of security at a little firm called Magic, Spells, and Illusions, Inc. You may have heard of it. We're the leading magical company in the entire world, developing and publishing almost all of the spells in use today. If you've ever bought a spell to help you track the stock market or wash dishes without getting

your hands wet, chances are we developed it. That kind of leadership means we more or less rule the magical world, so it's our job to make sure no one uses magic the wrong way. And that makes it my job.

This case may have looked like petty crime, but the weird thing was, it was the third crime just like it I'd busted up in the past couple of days, and my people had reported busting up several more. By just like it I mean *exactly*. They were using the same spell, flaws and all, and that meant someone was selling it. I had a pretty good idea who that would be, and I knew someone else who'd find that very interesting.

I flew downtown and tapped on the front window of a certain Gramercy town house, then found myself a comfy perch on a nearby streetlamp and waited a while. Nobody appeared to be home. I couldn't blame him, as it was a fine August Saturday morning, but I was surprised. Good weather usually wasn't enough to drag this kid away from his books. It looked like I needed to track him down. I'm good at surveilling even my friends, so I had a feeling I could narrow his current whereabouts down to a few key locations.

I got it in one. Instead of him bein' at home with his musty old books, he was in the Strand, surrounded by piles and shelves of books. Owen Palmer's a good kid, but he needs a life. He was so caught up in the book he was leafing through that he didn't even notice me when I landed on the shelf over his head, and I'd dropped my veils so that any magical person could have seen me. I craned my neck to see what book had him so fascinated. Since when did he get interested in architecture? And how long was it gonna take him to read that one page?

Instead of waiting all day, I cleared my throat. He jumped and nearly dropped his book, and that's when I noticed he hadn't been looking at it, after all. He'd been hiding behind a book while staring across the store. "What are you doing here, Sam?" he hissed, turning a bright shade of red and glancing nervously first

up at me, then back over to where he'd been staring. I couldn't resist following his line of sight to see what he was looking at, and what I saw made me grin even wider than the grin that was carved into my face. Well, whaddaya know. He was lookin' at a girl who was busily digging through a bargain bin.

"I'm surprised at you, boss," I teased. "I never saw you as the type to troll bookstores and try to pick up anything but a book."

"I wasn't trying to pick anything up," he protested, probably a little too strongly for it to be at all believable. "I just . . . noticed her."

"Well, then, why don't you talk to her?"

He blushed even more furiously and said, "What did you want?"

"Got something to report."

"Then let's get out of here. We can't really talk here."

He re-shelved the book he'd been hiding behind and led the way through the maze of shelves to the store exit. The girl he'd been staring at glanced up as we passed, and I could have sworn she looked straight at me and did a double take before she returned her attention to the books. But of course she couldn't see me, as I'd hidden myself from everyone but Palmer. She was probably noticing him, but trying not to look like she was noticing. He tended to turn heads, even if he didn't realize it. If she was noticing him while he noticed her, he'd have an easy time of it if he did so much as say "hi," but matchmaking wasn't in my job description, so it wasn't really up to me to tell him this.

We went to a nearby churchyard where we could talk in peace with a simple spell to hide us from the rest of the world so that no one saw him either talking to a gargoyle or talking to thin air. "What is it, Sam?" he asked, now looking all stern and businesslike, more like MSI's head of theoretical magic than like a shy schoolboy. Owen Palmer was probably the best wizard we had, even including the boss. Chances were that if he kept on the way he was going and kept his nose clean, he'd be the boss someday.

That's why I already called him boss. I figured I might as well get used to it.

"My people and I have been noticin' the same kind of magic all over town for the past couple of days. It's a bit darkish, and it's being used to steal stuff from delis. Not exactly the crime spree of the century, but the funny thing is, it ain't a real good spell, and each time I've seen it, it's the same kind of bad spell."

"So someone must be distributing this particular enchantment. It's not merely spontaneous magical experimentation."

"Exactly my thought. I figured you'd wanna know."

"Any idea who, or why?"

I snorted and flapped my wings. "Of course I have an idea who, and you're probably thinkin' the very same thing. No proof, though. Want me to grab the next jerk I see try to use the spell and ask him a few questions?" I flexed my talons to convey the way I planned to do the askin'.

"Yeah, it sounds like Idris, and he was trying to do that spell that went one step beyond benign veiling before we fired him. As I recall, he didn't quite have it perfected. But I doubt he'd be dumb enough to make it that easy to track back to him. I wonder how he's distributing it."

"For all I know, he's selling 'em from street corners, like those guys who sell the sheets with all the sex positions to the tourists on Times Square." As I expected, he blushed redder than a fire truck. It's probably mean of me, but I admit I did that on purpose. It's just so entertaining to see our mighty wizard get flustered like that.

"I'd love to get my hands on a copy."

"Of the sex position sheet?"

He turned even redder. "The spell. If I could get a look at it, I could figure out where it came from and how to counter it."

"So, what do you wanna do in the meantime?"

"Keep your eyes open. It might not hurt to have a friendly word with the next person you see trying to use that spell—but don't hurt anyone. We're supposed to be the good guys here. And let me

know if you notice any other patterns. We can't do much until we know what he's doing."

I saluted him with a wing. "Sure thing, boss. Now, you get back to your book browsing. I bet she's still in there. I also bet she'd let you buy her a cup of coffee if you tried talking to her." His only response was a glare that might have turned me to stone if I weren't already a proud carved-stone-American.



I FIGURED our best bet was to stake out the kind of delis that tended to be targeted by these miscreants, wait for 'em to act, intervening if necessary, and then retrace their steps. I knew a nifty little spell for doing that, but I needed a perp present to be able to cast it.

I rallied the troops on Monday morning. Now that I had a good suspicion of what was going on, this counted as work rather than just being freelance evil busting. Phelan Idris had been one of ours, working in research and development, but he wanted to make the kinds of spells MSI wasn't keen on. In fact, they went beyond what was legal for magic users to do, according to international code. So we'd let him go, and it looked like he'd taken some of his work with him. Nailing him would give me great personal and professional satisfaction.

I got my people set up around the city, watching a good cross section of delis. Because I'm the kind of boss who leads from the front, I took my own assignment and settled down to wait. Waitin's something I'm good at. It comes with the territory when you're made of stone. I don't have to worry about my arms or legs fallin' asleep or about having to drink a lot of coffee to stay alert. I just sit like I was carved to it. The only danger is sitting so long that I forget I'm sentient, but that takes years, and that would be a helluva stakeout.

I didn't have to wait too long until I hit pay dirt. The same

thing I'd observed before happened again: A skeevy, shifty-looking sort entered the deli, and that sent my senses tingling. If he wasn't one of the gang we were tracking, there was still a good chance he was up to something he shouldn't be, so I moved in.

Just as before, he tried to get away with stacks of goods, though at least this one was smart enough to steal booze instead of potato chips, and I dropped his veil before he got to the door. While the irate owner berated him and held him for the cops, I hit him with the tracing spell, and a glowing path appeared behind him.

I set off, following the path. Any hope that he'd lead me straight to his source faded pretty quickly. If he'd been meandering, he'd've moved more directly. The store where I'd tagged him had apparently not been the first place he'd hit. I tracked him to two more delis, and after each stop—before, in my case, since I was backtracking—he went to a particular parking garage. There wasn't anyone in that garage now, so I wondered if he went there to enjoy his purloined treats, to stash the goods for later, or to meet with someone.

I did find a few empty chip bags and beer bottles, but in this city, that wasn't entirely unexpected. It's cleaner than it used to be, but that doesn't mean they've managed to eliminate litter entirely. His trail led all over inside the garage, and I found a few full beer bottles stashed, but not enough to account for everything he must have stolen.

Eventually, I tracked his steps to a street corner full of what I guess you could call local color: guys set up with tables full of bootleg CDs, watches of questionable origin, and “designer” handbags that were probably held together by school glue. The scene was just askin' for a couple of TV cops to come runnin' through, chasin' a perp and knocking everything over. But since this was real life, they just kept on fleecin' tourists who thought they were getting a bargain.

The one thing I didn't see was anything that looked even

remotely magical. Yeah, they'd want to hide their nefarious dealings from the likes of me, but you'd think it would be bad for business to be totally invisible to your entire customer base. He'd definitely stopped here, though. His trail passed all the tables, and it held for some time at each table, like he'd been shopping. Either he'd bought something here, or he'd used the spell to steal some counterfeit watches. My trail would last at least another hour, so I thought it was worth getting the scoop on what was happening here.

I found myself a comfortable perch on a lamppost and went into surveillance mode again. Most wizards look like ordinary folk. They don't wear robes and pointy hats with stars and moons on them. At least, not in public. What they do at home is their own business. But there's still something about them that I can usually spot. Having magical powers changes the way people react to the world. There's a confidence, maybe even an arrogance, about them. When you can remake reality with a wave of your hand, you don't take well to being thwarted. The darker the wizard, the more obvious it is.

But I didn't spot anyone who looked like our kind of folks, either running the stands or browsing. Maybe I was wrong, I thought, and I needed to track farther. He might have merely stopped to shop for cheap CDs.

I was just about to take off and follow the trail some more when my buddy Rocky appeared. The Rockster's another one of my security team, and although he wouldn't be the sharpest thing in a drawer full of butter knives, he was a decent tracker. If he was here, then there had to be something going on at this corner.

"Hey, Sam!" Rocky called out as he alit on the newspaper rack under my lamppost. "Funny seein' you here. What's up?"

"I was trackin' a perp."

"Really? So am I! What are the odds?"

"Pretty good, seein' as we're on the same case."

"Oh! Right! So your guy came here, too?"

“Looks like it.”

“Think he was buyin’ a watch?” Rocky asked.

“Buyin’ a watch?” I sputtered. “No, you idiot. I think he was buyin’ a spell.”

“But I don’t see anyone sellin’ spells here.”

“Yeah, that’s the problem.”

It wasn’t long before another gargoyle showed up, Rocky’s pal, Rollo. If Rocky wouldn’t be the sharpest thing in a drawer full of butter knives, Rollo wouldn’t be the sharpest thing in a drawer full of rubber spatulas. But he was the most doggedly persistent gargoyle I’d ever met. He’d follow someone to the ends of the earth or sit for weeks watching without getting bored. If he’d also followed someone here, then something really had to be going on.

“Hey, Rocky, Sam, what’re you doin’ here?” he asked in his deep, rumbling voice. “I thought you were tracking bad guys.”

“We are. We tracked ’em to this place,” I said.

“Huh. Funny. My guy came here, too. They must like music. What CDs are they sellin’ here?”

I resisted the urge to cuff him upside the head with a wing. “I think they must’ve got somethin’ else here,” I said, trying to be patient. Most gargoyles aren’t known for bein’ quick. I’m kind of an exception. “But I’m not spottin’ anything. Either they’ve got it hidden and have a way to reveal it to their customers, or they aren’t here now. Let’s keep tracking them back and see if we find anything else.”

Following the rest of my guy’s trail only convinced me that the illicit market was where it was at. I didn’t run into any other security gargoyles, and he didn’t seem to have gone anywhere other than a coffee shop and an apartment in a part of Alphabet City that was resisting gentrification.

That had to mean there was a magical vendor in the market. I returned there and settled down for a serious stakeout. The sellers packed up their tables and headed out at dusk, and no one else arrived. That was when I called it a day, but I came back first thing

in the morning. There was a coffee cart doing a brisk business with commuters, but the bootleggers hadn't yet come out of the woodwork.

Finally, at about nine, a guy showed up, dragging a luggage cart with a stack of boxes and a folding table strapped to it. He set up with the kind of efficiency that told me he did this sort of thing a lot, and he turned out to be peddling used books. He struck me as a likely culprit. Spells and books tended to go together. Making sure my veil was good even against magical folk, I swooped down to get a closer look.

The books were a mix of review copies—the kind that weren't supposed to be sold—and paperbacks with photocopied covers taped to them—probably books that had been stripped by bookstores and that should have been trashed. I didn't see anything that looked like a spell, though. Those tended to be pamphlets or booklets. I supposed they could have been stuck inside the books, and smart shoppers with the right kind of magic could see them for what they were. If that was the case, I didn't have the right sort of magic because I saw nothing other than books whose sales weren't going to help their authors.

I waited around some more to see who might shop there and what they might be askin' for. The guy wasn't doing a brisk business, as far as I could tell. No one so much as stopped to browse. Midmorning, the other vendors started setting up shop, and by lunchtime, the book guy packed up his paperbacks and left.

I followed him across town to see if he set up anywhere else, but he just headed into a dingy storefront on the edge of the East Village. The windows were too grimy to see through, and he didn't put out the "open" sign. I watched outside the shop for a couple of hours, but no one came and he didn't leave.

I flew back to headquarters and went up to Palmer's office to report what I'd seen. "Maybe it's nothin'," I concluded. "But all our guys went to that corner, and he's the most likely vendor. We could try a longer stakeout, but I'm not sure we'd

see anything more.”

Palmer frowned and nodded. “I hate to say this, but maybe we should bring in Verification. They can spot right away if something’s being hidden. It would save us a lot of time.”

“If they know what they’re lookin’ for. Some of those folks could trip over a spell without seein’ it. They can also trip over the sidewalk without seein’ it.” Magical immunes can be very useful, in theory. Magic doesn’t work on ’em, so they see right past illusions. No matter what a magical person does to hide the use of magic, an immune will see what’s really there. The problem is that seein’ things that are really there isn’t good for a person’s mental health, not if you don’t know that there are fairies and elves living among us. By the time we discover immunes, they’re already a turn or two around the bend and not inclined to trust their own eyes. That makes them a little less than useful for crime-fighting purposes. Someone who can’t be sure what he saw is real makes a terrible witness.

But we didn’t have a lot of other options, that I could see. “I’ll keep on with the stakeout,” I said. “You talk to Verification and see if you can get someone to pay a visit to that corner. The book guy sets up pretty early and is gone by lunch. I’ll also put someone on the shop, and maybe we can have our immune swing by there, too.”

“Tracking the bookseller will probably be our best bet,” Palmer said. “If we know where he gets his spells, we might be able to eventually reach the originator.”

Before I left, I couldn’t resist teasing him. “So, how did things go with the bookstore girl on Saturday?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, tryin’ to sound oblivious, but the shade of pink rising from his collar told me he knew exactly what I meant.

“Did you go talk to her?”

“Of course not!”

I gave him a light tap on the back of his head with the tip of my

wing. “Why not? You stood there eyeballing her long enough.”

“She was gone by the time I got back to the store. And trying to pick up women in public is creepy.”

“So is staring at them.”

The pink in his cheeks turned to bright red. “I wasn’t staring for that long. And I was curious what kind of books she reads. I liked the way she smiled at people.”

I shook my head. “Let’s just hope this case isn’t as hopeless as you are.”



I WAS BACK in my spot bright and early the next morning. The book guy showed up and did his usual thing. I didn’t spot any of the immunes I knew, but I figured that if Gregor, the head of Verification, was being his usual charming self, he’d have been hard to reach and then dragged his feet, so we wouldn’t have anyone out there at the right time until the following morning.

There was finally a customer at the book table, and I moved closer to get a good look at what was going on. The customer fit the general demographic of slightly shady loser, the kind of guy who’d use his magical powers to shoplift from a deli instead of doing something with his life. He spent a lot of time browsing the books. I didn’t see him give a high sign or password or anything else that would have dropped the magical veil for him. He finally bought a paperback and shoved it into his battered canvas messenger bag.

I was torn between following him and tracking where he’d come from. I compromised by casting the spell on him that would show me his trail and then following him at least a little ways. He stopped at a coffee cart to buy a cup, then went to a park, where he sat down to read his book.

That didn’t look too interesting to me, so I flew back the way I’d come, watching his trail. Before he hit the book stall, he’d come

from a subway station. The trail went dead there. My spell wasn't strong enough to show where he'd been on a train. I flew along the path of the subway, looking to see if I spotted his trail again. When I reached a point where the various lines that served the station where I'd lost him diverged, and I hadn't seen a sign of him entering the subway, I gave it up. I could fly all over the city before I picked up the trail again, and I'd be lucky if the spell was still working by that point.

Besides, I hate goin' into Queens.

When I got back to the corner, the bookseller was gone. I tracked back to the customer and found him still on that park bench. Whatever he was reading, whether it was a paperback fantasy novel or an evil spell, it must have been pretty engrossing.

I'd have watched him the rest of the day to track him back home, but I got an alert an hour or so later that there'd been another theft, using that same spell. Whoever was selling this stuff wasn't upgrading, or else the customer still had an older version, because the spell was still ridiculously easy for us to disrupt.

This time, I got there soon enough to disguise myself as a human cop—a tricky illusion, but I'm pretty proud of it—and take the perp away. Just for grins, I let him see what I really looked like. I kept him secure until we got transport to get him to the office.

A search didn't reveal anything incriminating, other than a candy bar he'd managed to stash so it wasn't discovered when his spell was broken. He didn't have a spell pamphlet on him. He also didn't have any shady paperbacks. "So, whaddaya think?" I asked Palmer as we watched him through the glass of the interview room. "You wanna be the good cop or the bad cop?"

"Do we have to be either?"

"You think this mook is just gonna talk?"

"He doesn't look like a hardened criminal. I think he's pretty scared. He'll probably cooperate to get himself out of trouble."

"He'll probably cooperate faster if he's more scared."

He gave me a weary look and shook his head. "Let's start with nice."

"So, you'll be the good cop."

We entered the interview room, and I perched on the back of one of the chairs facing our thief. Palmer took a seat beside me and clasped his hands in front of him on the table. The perp smirked. "Who are you, the magic cops?"

"Not exactly," Owen said. "And you're fortunate. They would take this a lot more seriously than we are. We just want to know where you got the spell you used to steal."

"Why? It's a lousy spell."

"Exactly. We don't like bad magic being out there."

"So, you're trying to protect thieves from bad spells?"

"We're trying to protect *everyone* from bad spells. Today it may be nothing more than a spell for thievery that's too easy to break. Tomorrow, it could be a spell that harms innocent bystanders."

The guy shrugged helplessly. "It was just something I made up."

Palmer smiled. "I find that hard to believe."

"Why? Because I'm not a fancy corporate wizard like you? You think you're the only one who can make up spells?"

"Because we've been seeing that spell all over town. If you're the one who made it up, then we've caught the ringleader and we will be turning you over to the Council."

That got the suspect's attention, real fast. He sat up straight, coming out of his casual slouch. "Hey, wait, no! It's not me. I didn't make it up. I bought it. Total waste of money, too."

"If you consider it a waste of money, surely you have no loyalty to the person who sold it to you—who ripped you off."

I could practically smell the smoke as the guy's feeble brain worked overtime. "Oh, yeah, no."

"You're not afraid of him, are you?" Palmer asked gently, those big, blue eyes of his radiating sincerity.

"I'd have to know who it was to be afraid. I just bought it off a guy. He had a table on a street corner."

“How did you know where to find the table on the street corner?”

“I got a tip from a friend. He gave me a map of where I could find the stuff and a key that would let me see it.”

Palmer and I looked at each other. Now we were talkin’. This was what we needed. “Do you have the map and key?” Palmer asked.

“Nah, I gave them to a buddy so he could buy some stuff.” He laughed. “I guess he’ll get ripped off, too.”

“Do you know where your friend got the map and key?”

“He said he found them. He didn’t tell me more than that. Stuff like that gets passed around, if you know the right people. And I’m not going to tell you who my friend is, so don’t even ask me. I’m not a rat.”

I admired Palmer’s control in not swearing in frustration. So close, but we still didn’t have anything we could work with. We’d have to hope our immune got us something we could use.



I WAS at the market early the next day, so I could be in place before either the bookseller or our immune showed up. The bookseller was running late this morning, so late that the immune got there first. I wasn’t sure whether to be glad or worried that they’d sent Rowena. She was a spacey, flaky hippie chick who didn’t seem to have both feet firmly planted in this world, which tended to make her useless for real verification work. On the other hand, it meant she’d fit in well with our guy’s usual clientele. Assuming, that was, he ever showed up.

The CD and handbag sellers were already in place before the book guy got there, but Rowena didn’t seem to have noticed. She spent the time browsing the CDs one by one. I couldn’t tell if she was doing that on purpose to stall for time or if she’d forgotten why she was there.

When the bookseller finally arrived, Rowena was so busy looking at CDs, reading every label in great detail, that she didn't move. Again, I couldn't tell if she was being a particularly clever operative and not looking too eager or if she hadn't actually noticed that the bookseller was there. I was just wonderin' if I should maybe have a word with her when she drifted away from the CD table and over to the bookseller.

He didn't pay her much notice as she browsed the books the way she had the CDs, picking up each one and reading every word on the cover before flipping through it. I guess he was expecting to be shown that key thingy if she was the special kind of customer, and if she didn't have it, then she was only looking at books.

He did get a bit antsy when she reached the last row on the table after having flipped through everything else, but that could have just been because her silent, intense browsing was a bit unnerving. Even from my distance and knowing what she was really doing, I wanted to shout, "Just buy something, already!"

The kind of loser we were used to seeing as the primary customer for the spells we were tracking approached the corner, moving quickly, on a mission. The bookseller perked up, either recognizing this guy or this type. He glanced back and forth between the new guy, who stopped a few feet away and hovered like he wasn't sure what to do, and Rowena, who was still reading the covers of every book on the table, like she had all day. I couldn't tell if she was oblivious or pretending, but the bookseller's increasing agitation didn't appear to affect her at all. Most people would have either left the table or made a decision to buy something, but she just kept on doing her thing, showing no sign of feeling any pressure.

Finally, she got to the last book, looked up at the bookseller, smiled at him, and drifted away in a swirl of gauzy skirts, twining a strand of frizzy hair around her finger. I thought the bookseller would leap over his table and strangle her, but he clenched his fists, took a few deep breaths, and focused on the new guy who

now approached the table.

I was dyin' to debrief Rowena to find out what she'd seen, but I was also curious about what transaction would happen with the new guy, and I knew where to find Rowena, assuming she was able to get back to the office without an escort.

I double-checked my veiling magic to make sure no one other than an immune could see me and dropped down from my lamppost to stand on the ground next to the book table. It woulda been nice if I coulda found a higher spot that was closer because I couldn't see much from ground level, but at least I could hear them.

The customer leaned over, and I got the impression he was showin' the bookseller something—that key the perp we'd caught had mentioned, I figured. "I don't have much with me today," the bookseller said. "Was there something in particular you were looking for?"

"I heard there's something new," the guy said after glancing around. He couldn't have looked any shiftier if he'd tried. His body language radiated guilt about something. Even a normal, nonmagical cop walking by would have stopped to ask him what he was up to. "Something, um, even stronger?"

If I hadn't known better, I'd have thought they were talking about drugs. Then again, maybe they were. I didn't yet have any evidence that this guy was really selling shady spells. At any rate, I was pretty sure that his primary business wasn't selling books of questionable legality.

"I have heard that there might be something new coming," the bookseller said. "But I haven't yet seen anything or heard anything directly. You could try someone else."

The customer gave a long, "Oh," in response, his shoulders slumping in dejection. Maybe they were talking about drugs, after all. "I guess I can check around." He shoved his hands in his pockets and sloped off, dragging his feet like he was too exhausted to lift them.

The bookseller cleared his throat loudly, but the customer didn't seem to notice. In exasperation, the bookseller called out, "Hey, you forgot something."

The guy patted his pockets, not sure what he'd left behind. Finally, it dawned on him that the seller might have had something more to say to him, and he turned back. "Yeah? What did I forget?" he said when he reached the table.

The seller glanced around, making sure no one was listening, then quickly scribbled a note on a slip of paper and handed it to the guy. "You dropped this," he said a little too loudly. In a whisper and all in a rush, trying to get the words out as quickly as possible, he added, "This is my supplier, if there's anything new he'll have it before it hits the street, but you didn't hear it from me. The password is Gandalf."

It took the customer a moment or two to process this. Finally he said, "Okay, thanks," and headed out, still moving like he didn't have much of a sense of purpose.

I took to the air to follow him, though I had to keep flying ahead and circling back because I couldn't remain airborne moving as slowly as he walked. I'd be really irked if he was just lookin' for drugs, but I couldn't take the chance that he wasn't out for magic, and if he was heading up the food chain, this could be our lucky break. It would have helped if I knew what Rowena had seen. She hadn't tried to buy anything, so maybe there hadn't been any spells, but would she have tried without having that key?

I don't have pockets for carrying a phone, but let's just say I have a way to make phone calls. I tapped my ear to activate my earpiece and called Palmer. "Has Rowena made it back yet?" I asked when he answered.

"Not that I've heard."

"I guess it's too soon—and that's even if she didn't get sidetracked along the way. Do you have a number to reach her?"

"I can get it if she has one. Why?"

"Another customer showed up while she was there, and he

apparently didn't find what he wanted. The seller sent him to his supplier. I'm trackin' him, but it would help if I knew what she saw."

"Hold on a moment."

It didn't take him too long to get back to me, not even a whole verse of "The Girl from Ipanema." "Sorry about that," he said. "She doesn't seem to have a cell phone, at least, not that we have the number for. She did have a company-issued one, but she lost it and they haven't replaced it."

"Well, see if you can grab her as soon as she gets back to the office and find out what she saw. I couldn't get a sense of it from watching her. It sure would be nice if we could find ourselves a nice, reliable immune."

"I'm afraid that's an oxymoron."

I was so busy talking to Palmer that I nearly missed it when my quarry picked up his pace. It looked like he was heading for a bagel shop, and I couldn't help but wonder if he was going to try to pull a magical heist or if he just needed a carb fix, but instead of entering the shop, he went through the entrance for the offices upstairs.

I said something that probably shouldn't be repeated in polite company. Doors aren't usually an obstacle for me, not even when they're locked, but they do get tricky when you're tailing someone while veiled. It's just about impossible to magic open a door without anyone noticing the door opening, even if they don't see you. Your best bet is to find someone to follow inside. I wasn't close enough to follow my guy in, and there wasn't anyone else approaching.

I looked for an open window, but it was a newer building, one of those that's climate-controlled, with windows that don't open. Since there wasn't anyone approaching, I took a chance that he was far enough inside not to notice the door opening and closing behind him and waved a hand to open the door just enough for me to fly inside. I let the door shut as gently as possible behind me, in

hopes that he wouldn't hear it.

My luck had held out. He was talking to a security guard who blocked the way to the elevator, and they were both intent enough on their conversation that they didn't seem to have noticed the door. I'd have thought any security guard worth his salt would've booted this guy right out, but either the suspect had whammied him or had something that gave him passage because the guard pressed a button that opened a gate into the elevator vestibule. I flew over my quarry's head, getting there just in time to board the elevator with him.

It wasn't dignified, but I hung bat-like from the grid of the elevator's ceiling, my wings folded over my body. That was my surest bet for being able to fly out of the elevator as soon as my guy left. It was hard to take off quickly from the ground, and the elevator was short on perches.

There were a couple of moments when the guy glanced around, like he was aware he wasn't alone. My veils were good, but they aren't entirely foolproof with magic folks who know that sort of thing exists. If they know what to look for, they can sense the presence of an invisible person. I doubted this guy was that sharp, but I went as still as I could and hoped my weight wasn't enough to make the ceiling grid bend. He never focused in my direction, so I hoped he was just edgy because he was up to no good. Fortunately, it was a short trip, just a few floors, so there wasn't much time for him to notice me.

Still, I was extra cautious when the elevator stopped and the doors opened. I'd lose him if I flew out and he stayed on board, but I'd get caught on the elevator if I waited too long for him to leave. He might notice me if I moved too quickly. So, basically, it was your classic lose-lose-lose scenario, with only a tiny margin for success. That's why they pay me the big bucks. I spread my wings, preparing for flight, but making sure I didn't hit him, and the moment I saw him move, I released my hold and gave a good flap that propelled me into a narrow corridor.

This wasn't a high-end office facility. In just about any other city, this would have been where you'd find bottom-feeders and those barely a step above working out of their garages. In New York, I was pretty sure these were the offices of people like lawyers and accountants who weren't part of a huge firm. I had to be careful not to brush my wings against the sides of the hallway as I flew, and I was glad I didn't have to walk on the industrial carpet that had seen better days and maybe a few bodily fluids. The doors we passed had windows in them, but they were either frosted or incredibly dirty.

The door my guy stopped at didn't have a nameplate on the door, just a number. The guy took a slip of paper out of his pocket and squinted at it before he knocked on the door. I'd alit on top of a fire extinguisher case nearby, so I didn't get a good look at the paper, but I figured it was what the bookseller had given him.

A voice from inside called out, "Who is it?"

My guy said, "Uh, Gandalf?"

There was a buzz and a click, and the guy opened the door. I barely managed to coast through the doorway after him. In fact, I had to land faster than I'd have liked because I had to pull in my wings before they got caught in the rapidly closing door.

I found myself in a small, windowless office so cluttered that it made Palmer's office look like an industrial clean room. There were stacks of boxes along the walls and in the chairs. Books were piled on the desk and on a bookcase, with no attempt at shelving. There were also a lot of papers on the desk, but there the word "piled" would have been inaccurate. "Strewn" was a more apt description. There didn't seem to be any order to anything.

I allowed myself one quick flap of the wings—hoping I didn't ruffle any pages—so I could reach higher ground on a stack of books and get a better view of the proceedings.

I'll admit, a part of me had hoped that my guy had led me to the ringleader of the operation, but no such luck. At least, it wasn't the ringleader I suspected. I didn't know the office's resident. He

took the concept of nondescript to new heights. If I'd bumped into him on the street and actually noticed him, I'd have assumed he was an accountant. He'd be the kind of guy who did the books for small, slightly shady businesses—not crooked enough for the mob, but not the person you'd hire to do your mother's taxes. He wore a short-sleeved dress shirt, top button undone and a tie just a little too wide for current fashion, loosened and askew. His thinning hair was plastered down, like each strand being exactly in place would create the illusion of a full head of hair. I was a little disappointed that he wasn't wearing heavy black glasses repaired with tape to complete the image of a low-rent bean counter.

Then again, the papers strewn all over the desk looked a lot like spreadsheets, and some of these books were ledgers, so maybe that's exactly what he was, and old-school at that, since I didn't see a computer. The question was, did he also sell unauthorized spells on the side? There wasn't anything in here that looked magical, and nothing was pinging my magical radar. Maybe my guy just needed some help with his finances.

“Can I help you?” the accountant said.

“Uh, well, one of your sellers sent me here.”

“Do you have the key?”

Okay, scratch the “just needed some help with his finances” theory. Asking for the key proved this was part of the spell network.

My guy pulled on a cord that hung around his neck, lifting a small key out from under his shirt. He started to drop it back into its hiding place, but the accountant waved his hand, and I felt the magic as the cord unknotted itself, the key slipped off, and it flew into the accountant's hand. He examined it closely, squinting at it, and I felt him use magic to test it. “It seems genuine,” he said. “But why did you come to me?”

“You get the spells first, don't you?”

“They have to come through me to reach the distributors. But that doesn't explain why you're here.”

“I hear there’s something new, but it’s not on the streets yet. I also hear that I could get a jump on things if I cut out the middleman. Do you have it?”

“It’s not ready for distribution.”

“I don’t care about getting it disguised as something innocent-looking. The raw material is fine. No one’s watching you sell this to me.”

It was a good thing my invisibility veil also muffled sound or they’d have both heard my snort of laughter. Little did they know . . . You’d think shifty magical folk would have had some way to check for magical intruders, but unless they’d set me up for a big-time sting and they were playing it ice-cold, there was no sign they knew I was there. This was why we employed magical immunes. Even the flakiest immune would have known to at least ask if there was supposed to be a gargoyle sitting on top of that stack of books in the corner. These guys didn’t follow even the most basic magical security protocols.

The accountant guy did glance around, but it was more like it was second nature when engaged in underhanded dealing to make sure he wasn’t being watched, even in his own private office, than any kind of security routine, since he never engaged his magical senses. But I guess it made him feel good, so he handed the guy’s key back to him, stood up, took a keyring out of his pocket, sorted through it to find a particular key, then bent to unlock and open his upper desk drawer.

I was at the wrong angle to see what was inside. All I could tell was that he’d opened a folder. He glanced up again at the guy, frowning, before apparently coming to a decision. “It’ll cost you extra,” he said. “I’m not supposed to release this early. And you can practice it, but don’t use it until Saturday. If it shows up in use early, they’ll know where it came from, and if they come after me, I’ll come after you. You’ll still be ahead of the game even if you wait.”

The guy nodded eagerly. “Sure. Yeah. I mean, it’s only a couple

of days, and it'll work better if I practice it some, right? And I'll be able to use it while everyone else is just starting to buy it, so I'll get a jump on it before anyone cracks down on it."

The accountant froze, and the top of the folder fell closed. "Cracks down?"

The guy winced, probably mentally kicking himself for mentioning it. "Well, that hide-your-loot spell got overused, and I heard at least one guy got caught. MSI is on to it, it seems. That's why I wanted something new."

The accountant went pale—even paler than his usual pasty skin. "MSI is on it?"

"Relax, they won't get back to you. They're just foiling the guys who screw up when they use a spell, and I think most of it's been dumb luck."

I don't know who he was calling "dumb," but I wasn't the one making shady magical deals without checking to make sure no magic was in use in the room.

Still frowning, the accountant opened the folder, took out a sheet of paper, and went over to an ancient photocopier in the corner behind the desk. He had to move some books—coverless paperbacks like those on the bookseller's table—off the top of it in order to lift the lid and lay the sheet on the glass. He ran off one copy, returned the sheet to his folder, locked it back up in the drawer, and said, "Okay, a hundred bucks."

"A hundred bucks? Seriously? Those spells only cost twenty."

"The previous ones, yes. This one is going to go for fifty. And you're getting it early."

"Not fifty bucks' worth of early."

"Then if you don't want it, or if you want to wait until it hits the street on Saturday . . ."

"No!" The mook came halfway out of his seat, reaching across the desk for the sheet of paper, before apparently realizing at the last second that the accountant might not take that well, and although he looked pretty meek, he did deal in nasty underground

spells. The customer fell back into his seat with an audible thud, and he clasped his hands in his lap. "What I mean is, I'll pay, but I don't carry that kind of cash."

"I don't take checks or plastic, so you'd better find the cash."

The customer pulled out his wallet. "Let's see . . . I've got forty-five, forty-six, forty-seven bucks in cash. And what about my watch? It's gotta be worth at least fifty bucks."

"Great. You can take it to a pawn shop, get fifty bucks for it, and come back with the cash."

"Or you could take it as a guarantee. I just have to run to an ATM to get the cash. I've got the money."

"You can go get the cash and come back. The spell's not going anywhere."

The accountant hit the buzzer to unlock the door, and the would-be customer took the sign that it was time to go get his cash. I decided I was better off staying where I was than following the guy I was tailing, since I knew he'd be coming back and getting in and out alongside him without him noticin' was a bit of a challenge. While he was gone, I tried to see what I could learn about the accountant.

He locked the original spell and the copy up in his drawer and went back to work on what seemed to be actual accounting. He hummed under his breath as he worked, slightly off-pitch, and that made enough of a racket that I wasn't too afraid to move around. The problem was that there wasn't much to see. I didn't spot anything that gave any sign that this was a magical operation. Whatever he had, it was in that locked drawer. The book police could possibly crack down on him, since it looked like this was where he slipped the spells into the books, and therefore he had a supply of stripped paperbacks, but I couldn't find any evidence of his dealing in shady spells or of where he got his magical goods.

The accountant stopped what he was doing and looked up, frowning. If I'd had a normal human kind of heart, I might have had a heart attack. Bein' a magical creature to begin with, just

existing means I exude a certain amount of magic. Without it, I'm nothing more than an extremely handsome block of stone. Add all the magic I use to make myself invisible, and someone paying attention would be able to detect me.

I might have sighed in relief if I weren't being perfectly still when the accountant sniffed and made a face. My eyes and ears are keen, but my sense of smell leaves something to be desired, and even I could smell the combination of body spray and sweat the customer had left behind. So, that's what got the accountant's attention. At least, I hoped that's all it was.

He bent and opened a lower drawer on the desk, one that didn't require a key, and took out a can of air freshener spray. He stood and came around the desk, heading toward me. In the cluttered office, I didn't have too many options. If I stayed where I was, there was a good chance he'd trip over me. If I moved, he might notice that he wasn't alone. My leg muscles aren't great, since I do more flying than walking, but I jumped with all my might, only letting my wings flap ever so slightly, just enough to get me out of the way and on top of a nearby box, a split second before the accountant walked right through the space where I'd been. He gave the guest chair and the area around it a good spray of something pine-scented before going back to his desk.

He was barely back in his chair when there was a knock on the door. A voice on the other side called out, "I'm back!" The accountant buzzed him in, and he entered, waving a handful of bills. "Here's your cash," he said, breathing hard, his face red and sweaty. He must have sprinted to the nearest ATM. This guy really wanted that spell. I wondered why, if he had a hundred bucks in ready cash—or did this mean he wouldn't make this month's rent if he didn't score big using the spell?

The accountant counted the money and used one of those counterfeit-detecting pens on it, then waved his hand over it, the faint sense of magic suggesting that he was checking it for signs of a spell. Finally, satisfied that the cash was the real deal, he

unlocked the drawer and took out the copy of the spell.

He hesitated before handing it over. “Remember, you can’t use it until Saturday.”

“Got it, nothing until Saturday.”

“And you didn’t get this from me. You don’t send anyone else my way.”

“I’ve never heard of you.”

The accountant paused, then finally handed the spell to his customer. “Now, get out of here. I don’t want to see you again.”

The customer was busy staring at the sheet he held, like he was already trying to learn the new spell, but at the accountant’s words, he jumped, recovered his wits, and folded the spell up, sticking it in his shirt pocket, before standing to leave.

This was where things got tricky for me. I had to get out the door at the same time as my quarry, but without him noticing me hot on his heels. I barely made it—in fact, the door caught the tip of my wing and bounced back, but neither of them seemed to notice anything amiss. The elevator was a little easier going down, since I knew where he was getting off and I could time my flight accordingly. Once we were outside the building, I stuck to him. I didn’t for a moment believe he’d wait until Saturday. It wasn’t as though the accountant had any idea who he was or how to find him, so what was he gonna do if the spell got used early, if he even found out? I was pretty sure that’s exactly what was going through my guy’s head.

Meanwhile, I called HQ and got someone assigned to watch the accountant. If he was a distributor, he might be our best bet for finding the source. I’d have stayed on him myself, but I doubted he was goin’ anywhere soon, and I wanted to see what this new spell did when my guy either practiced it or used it.

The guy went straight to a coffee shop and ordered a plain cup of Joe—the cheapest thing on the menu. He sat at a table in the back corner, where no one could look over his shoulder. Unfortunately, that included a certain gargoyle. There wasn’t a

thing behind him I could perch on or cling to. I had to settle for standing on the chair across from him and watching him read. His lips moved slightly, but not enough for me to tell what he was reading.

There was a hairy moment when someone asked, “Are you using this chair?” and nearly pulled it out from under me. I had to flap furiously to get airborne before the other patron noticed that the chair was way heavier than it should have been. My flapping created a stir that fluttered the spell. It flew out of the mook’s hands and onto the floor right in front of me, face up, even, but I barely got a glimpse before he dove to retrieve it.

Figuring that he was gonna be awhile, I followed a patron out and found myself a good spot on a lamppost where I could watch the door. I got ahold of Palmer on the phone. “Any word from Rowena?” I asked, though by now I was pretty sure what she’d have reported.

“He was selling spells, including one that sounds like the one we’ve been seeing. I wish we’d thought to tell her to buy one, but she didn’t think of it for herself. Though I suppose he might not have sold to her without that key our prisoner mentioned. We need to get one of those keys.”

“I’ve got my guys lookin’ into the middleman. I don’t know if he’s got a direct connection to the source or if he just gets a fax every so often. At any rate, he’s gonna have a new spell out Saturday. I only got a glance at it, but it looks like it involves some kind of mind whammy, not just an illusion.”

There was a sharp gasp on the other end of the line. “Oh, that’s not good.”

“Yeah, which is why I’m stickin’ to this guy so we can see what he does with it. I’ll keep you posted.”

Much to my surprise, when my guy left the coffee shop, he headed home—or at least what I presumed was his home. He went into an apartment building and didn’t come out for a long time. That’s where bein’ a gargoyle comes in handy. I found myself a

comfortable perch and settled in.

By the middle of the next morning, I was startin' to think he'd slipped out a back door. It was well past the time most people would have headed out to work and I'd yet to see a sign of him. I'd been sure he was so eager to use the spell that he'd have been out at the crack of dawn. It was nearly lunchtime by the time he finally emerged. I guess he was sticking closer to his promise than I expected. He looked a lot more bright-eyed and bushy-tailed than he had the day before—and I mean that figuratively. I don't think he was experimenting with *that* kind of spell—and he'd spiffed up a bit. He wouldn't blend in on Wall Street, but the sight of him wouldn't make security guards sit up and take notice, either. Whatever he planned to be up to, I doubted it involved magically shoplifting junk food.

I called it in to HQ before I took off after him. After walking a few blocks, he went into a bank, looked around, picked up a brochure, and left. I couldn't tell if he was casing the joint or looking for a safe place to stash his ill-gotten loot. He did look a bit unsettled as he left, pale and with beads of sweat on his forehead. He wiped his face with a handkerchief and leaned against the wall outside the bank, breathing hard. After a few minutes, he shoved himself away from the wall and joined the flow of pedestrians heading toward downtown.

He went into the next bank he passed. It was crowded, given that it was lunchtime on a midmonth payday Friday. There were lots of people cashing or depositing their paychecks. At this bank, I spotted a couple of people who were obviously magical folk, as they had wings. Their veils must have been set to disguise themselves from nonmagical people, but anyone with magic could see them for what they were. My guy took one look at them and turned around, glancing at his watch and muttering something about the line being too long, just loud enough for people around him to hear. Again, he looked sweaty and shaky. Whatever he planned to do, he was at least a little afraid to do it.

He paused and hesitated outside the next bank, then shook his head and moved on. He passed a fast-food joint, stopped, and turned back. That really made me wonder what his plan was. I couldn't think of too many ways that he'd make massive profits magically holding up a burger emporium.

It turned out he was hungry for lunch. He got a combo meal and stood holding his tray, looking around for a seat in the crowded restaurant. A young woman sitting alone at a nearby table looked up and made eye contact with him. He smiled, holding that eye contact, and approached. "May I join you?" he asked.

"Be my guest," she replied.

I thought I sensed some magic being used, but I gotta admit, I was distracted by the smell of French fries cooking. Would the lady have let him sit with her if he hadn't hit 'er with a whammy? If he had used the spell, it must require eye contact to work. That would make it of limited use in this city, where the usual mode of operation is "I'll pretend not to see you if you'll pretend not to see me."

Once he sat with her, he didn't try to make small talk. Maybe he really just wanted a seat. He ate his burger while she sipped her drink and read her magazine. She looked up at him as she packed up her trash, and this time I was sure I felt magic. He said very softly, "catsup," and she automatically handed him a leftover packet. She blinked and stood up with her tray. He grinned to himself and let out a long sigh.

I followed the lady out so I could give Palmer a shout. "Whatever he's up to, it seems to require eye contact. I think he was just testin' it on someone, and it worked. Or it seemed to." I described the events from the restaurant.

"It does somewhat limit the potential damage if it requires eye contact," Palmer said. "It's not too far beyond hypnotism, and it's very difficult to do that outside a controlled environment. I wonder how he plans to use it."

"He's gone into a couple of banks, and each time he's come out

sweaty, pale, and shaking. Maybe he's hopin' to have a teller make eye contact so he can get her to hand over a bunch of cash. He's gotta be planning to use the new spell, because it's not as though he can sneak out with stacks of money under his shirt."

"I wonder how long the eye contact is required. Does that start the spell, or does it need to be sustained?"

"Well, that lady didn't change her mind about lettin' him sit with her, but it's not as though it would be too odd to share a table during the lunch rush. I doubt she'd have blinked out of it and wondered what he was doing there, so it's hard to judge."

"Stay on him, and we should probably have people ready to act. Keep me posted."

I was beginning to think the guy had stayed to apply for a job, he took so long to leave the restaurant. When he eventually came out, he moved with something almost resembling a sense of purpose. He headed straight for the nearest bank branch, but instead of going inside, he leaned against the wall outside. It looked like he was gonna be there awhile, so I landed on the nearest lamppost to watch him.

As near as I could tell, he was scoping out the people leaving the bank. He kept his head down and acted like he didn't notice the obviously magical folks or anyone who was large and looked physically threatening. Anyone else, he smiled at and said, "Hi!" but this bein' New York, they all pretended they didn't see him. He must have been there a good half hour, and lurking outside a bank for that long tends to make people suspicious. When the bank's security guard stepped outside and glanced in his direction, he quickly shoved himself away from the wall and made tracks down the sidewalk.

He repeated the process at several more banks, but either he never found quite the right target or he couldn't get anyone to meet his eyes long enough for him to work the whammy on 'em. Eventually, we were almost at the tip of the island, so there wasn't much farther he could go. It was now or never, so I called for

backup. If he was gonna do anything today, it would be here. By now, it was close to the end of the workday, so people were gettin' cash for the weekend from the bank's ATMs. If he was plannin' to con someone into handing over money, this was a target-rich environment.

We were close to MSI headquarters, so my people were there in no time. Pretty soon, we had gargoyles situated on every window ledge and rooftop on the street. There was no way he'd get away from us. But it wasn't just my people who were there. Palmer and his buddy, Rod Gwaltney, who was technically in charge of personnel, but sometimes joined in on operations like this, also showed up.

Palmer headed into the bank, and from what I could see through the windows, he went to the table where you can write out checks or deposit slips and started writing. Gwaltney stood on the curb near where our guy lurked, checking his watch and looking down the street like he was impatiently waiting for someone.

The suspect went through his usual routine of smiling and speaking to people as they came out of the bank. I guess he finally figured that people coming out of a bank would be suspicious of someone lurking outside and speaking to them, so he started talking to them on their way in, maybe thinking that if they'd already spoken, they'd be more likely to look at him on their way out.

He had about the same luck as before, which is to say none. Nobody heading into the bank looked like an easy target to me. Most were the Wall Street power broker type, hardheaded and so focused on themselves or their cell phones that I wasn't sure even a spell could break through. He was looking pretty discouraged when a young woman came up the sidewalk toward the bank. She walked rapidly, clearly in a hurry, but when he said, "Good afternoon," she turned to look at him, smiling and nodding in response. He grinned and straightened as she entered the bank. I

know it sounds like a cliché, but he literally rubbed his hands together in glee. If he hadn't found a good mark, after all, he was blowing it with anyone else who came by because he looked outright shady now. People gave him a wider berth than they'd give a passed-out panhandler.

A second later, I got a call from Palmer. "Did he talk to the girl who just came in?" He sounded like he was barely whispering into the phone.

"Yeah, and she actually acknowledged him. Why? Is she acting funny? She hasn't tried to hold up the bank, or anything, has she?"

"No. But it's *her*."

"Her?" I had a feelin' I knew what he meant, but the kid was such an easy mark, I couldn't resist havin' a little fun.

"The one from the bookstore."

"Well, I know I advised you to talk to her, but don't do that now."

"But what if he did something to her?"

"Intervene if it looks like she's gonna do somethin' that would get her in trouble, but otherwise, this may be our only chance to see what this spell really does. Leave it to you to crush on the only girl in Manhattan who makes eye contact with strangers. What's she doin'?"

"She's in line at the ATM." I noticed that he didn't deny crushing on her.

"I would tell you to keep an eye on her, but you'd probably do that anyway, huh?"

"Sam, I try to be nice, but I do own a chisel."

"Hey, just kidding."

There must have been a long line at the ATM, because it was close to ten minutes before Palmer's gal came out of the bank. Our guy was getting real antsy, checking his watch, frowning, pacing back and forth on his square of sidewalk. The girl might have been naive enough to make eye contact with a stranger, but she was street smart enough not to be counting her cash as she emerged

from the bank. As soon as he saw her, our guy snapped to attention and approached her. “Hi again,” he said.

Now she looked a bit wary. “Um, hi,” she said, sidestepping him to move up the sidewalk. He caught up with her and kept pace. He struggled to keep up with her, even though he had much longer legs. He didn’t look like he was used to exerting himself much. They hadn’t yet reached my perch, so I stayed still and waited for them to pass beneath me.

“Looking forward to the weekend?” he asked.

She turned to look at him and froze. This was it, I was sure. I felt a surge of magic and knew he was doing whatever he planned to do. Behind them, I saw Palmer leave the bank. There was a flash of anger in his eyes when he saw his girl with the creep, and I hoped he didn’t do anything that would derail our mission here. He’s a pretty level-headed sort, but I’d never seen him around a girl, so I didn’t know if he’d do something stupid and chivalrous.

I glanced back at the girl and realized she wasn’t staring at the creep. She was staring at me. “Was that there before?” she asked. She had a slight drawl, which explained her interacting with a stranger. She didn’t sound like a native New Yorker.

“Was what?” the guy said, breaking eye contact to glance around.

“The gargoyle. Actually, there are gargoyles all over the place. You’d think I’d have noticed them. It’s a bit early to start decorating for Halloween, isn’t it?”

She saw us? That shouldn’t have been possible. I checked my veiling spell, and it was holding tight. Nobody should have been able to see me. I should have been invisible even to our own people.

The guy was as baffled as I was, but apparently he wasn’t smart enough to make the connection that gargoyles might mean security forces were present, because he turned back to her, caught her eyes once more, and said, “Hey, mind giving me a hundred bucks?” He said it as casually as he’d asked to share the table at the fast-food

joint, and I felt his magic as he spoke.

She took a big step back from him and clutched her purse tighter against her body. "Are you mugging me, or panhandling?"

I couldn't see the guy's face, but I did feel the surge of magic as he tried to whammy her again. "Neither. You just want to give me a hundred dollars."

"I'm afraid you picked the wrong person to hit up for money," she said, getting over her shock enough to start moving again, hurrying away from him. She was close to getting out of range for me, and I didn't dare move if she could see me. So far, she'd written me off as an early Halloween decoration, but she wouldn't be able to do that if I started flying.

Fortunately, Palmer and Gwaltney were on the case, and the sidewalk was crowded enough that they blended in and didn't look like they were stalking her. For whatever reason, the spell wasn't working on her, so we weren't going to get a good look at what it did. Now the key was keeping her from getting hurt without letting her see magic at work.

She reached an intersection with a "don't walk" signal, and unlike a lot of the other people around her, she actually stopped. That allowed our culprit to catch up with her. "Hey!" he said, moving around so that he was in front of her. "I just wanted to talk to you."

"I'm not interested," she said, turning away from him.

The guy frowned and reached into his pocket, pulling out a folded sheet of paper that he proceeded to read. While he was checking his spell, the light changed, and the girl crossed the street. It took the guy a moment to realize he was losing his target, and then he had to dodge cars to follow her because the light had changed again. I don't know why he didn't give up and try someone else, but so far he seemed to be blaming the spell or his ability instead of his target.

Palmer was right behind them, close enough to keep an eye on things, but not so close that the girl would notice him following

her. He managed to cross the street against the light without breaking stride or inconveniencing a driver. I was never sure if that was just a knack of his or if he'd developed a spell for that. Gwaltney had a little more trouble, having to dodge cars and wait for a bus to pass. By now, I thought it was safe for me to move, but I made sure to stay well behind them, just close enough to overhear.

The guy caught up with the girl at the next intersection, where she again stopped to wait for the light. If I hadn't already had the impression that she wasn't local from her drawl and her willingness to look at the guy, I'd have been sure of it now. New Yorkers have a very casual relationship with traffic signals. I felt the guy try to give her the whammy again. "Don't you want to give me something?" the guy asked.

"No, I don't," she said. "I want you to leave me alone. If you're going to mug me, then I need to see a weapon. That's the only way you're going to get any money out of me, and I certainly don't have a hundred bucks to give you." I was starting to see what Palmer saw in her. The girl had spunk.

She moved as soon as the light changed, darting across the street, and before the guy could follow her, Palmer stepped in, detaining him with a wave of his hand. I was impressed, or maybe disappointed. It was his chance to play hero and meet the girl he'd been admiring from afar, but he acted in a way that meant the girl would never know he'd come to her rescue. She was too busy practically jogging away to notice what was going on behind her.

Palmer summoned the spell out of the guy's grasp. "Let's have a look at this, shall we?" he said. He read for a moment, then shook his head. "Hmm, there are too many violations here to list easily. You're trying to use influence on the nonmagical. That's forbidden."

"It's a lousy spell," the guy said. "It didn't work. I thought maybe I needed to get closer. Maybe it requires physical contact, though it doesn't say anything about that, just eye contact. It

worked when I tried it earlier.”

“So you admit that you were trying to use magic to manipulate a nonmagical person for your own personal gain?”

The guy went white. He’d been so focused on making the spell work that it didn’t seem to have occurred to him that he was confessing to a crime. Palmer wasn’t dressed like an enforcer, but you never knew. “I can show you where I got it,” the guy said.

I landed on the newspaper rack next to them. I figured that with the girl gone, it was safe for me to join in. “We already know. We just didn’t know what the spell did.”

“Thank you for giving us a copy,” Palmer added as he folded the paper and tucked it into his own pocket.

“Want I should call in the enforcers to bring him in, boss?” I asked.

Palmer studied the guy for a moment. “He didn’t do anything that we have any evidence of, but he was in possession of an unauthorized spell full of violations. The enforcers would consider that proof of intent to commit a magical crime.”

“Yeah, bustin’ up this kind of thing is practically the reason they exist,” I said. “We should also bring in his source, let him know what someone’s doin’ with his spells. I don’t think you were supposed to use this until tomorrow, were you?”

I thought the guy would pass out. Me knowing that showed him just how much evidence we probably had on him. “No, you can’t do that,” he moaned. “Please! I won’t use the spell again.”

“What about the one for shoplifting using magic?” Palmer asked.

“I never used that one!”

I looked at Palmer. “Whaddaya think, boss? If you ask me, he’s not worth the paperwork.”

“Well, all we have on him was the spell, which didn’t seem to work, so perhaps the enforcers wouldn’t be too eager to get involved. The spell was what I wanted. We can let him go—this time.”

The guy practically wilted with relief. "Thank you, thank you so much."

"But we know where you live, so you'd better keep your nose clean," I warned. "There are better ways to use magic, you know."

He didn't waste time giving us a sob story about doing what he had to do to get an operation for his sick mother, or anything like that, for which I had to give him some respect. He merely took off in a flash. I didn't know how long he'd manage to stay out of trouble, but I made a mental note to check in on him every so often.

By now, Rod had caught up to us after finally getting past the traffic. "Wasn't that our guy?" he asked.

"Yeah, but we seem to have foiled him, so we let him go," I said.

"You let him go?" Gwaltney asked.

"He wasn't successful at whatever he was trying to do," Palmer said. "From a quick glance at the spell, I'd have to say that it's not well-designed, but it should have worked. Maybe he's just too incompetent to cast it properly."

"More like he tried casting it on the wrong person," I said with a snort.

"What do you mean?" Gwaltney asked. "Did she have a counterspell? I didn't think I noticed anything magical about her."

"More like she's immune," I said. "I'm pretty sure she saw me and my guys. She talked about seein' gargoyles that she'd never noticed before and said she thought it was too early to put out Halloween decorations. That could explain why the spell didn't work on her. He was doin' it right and had enough power, but he managed to pick a magical immune as his victim. Of all the luck."

"An immune? Really?" Gwaltney said, his eyes lighting up. "And she seemed to be fairly functional. She handled a stressful situation pretty well. We need to look into this. Do we have any way of figuring out who she is and where we might find her?"

Palmer blushed from collar to scalp. "I might have seen her

around. She seems to live near me.”

Rod grinned and clapped him on the back. “That’s her? The one you have a crush on? The one you spotted at the bookstore?”

“I didn’t say it was a crush. I just said she seemed nice.”

“But you know where to find her?”

Palmer didn’t meet his friend’s eyes, and if he turned any redder, he’d be stopping traffic. “I might have noticed a few things about her routine, since I keep seeing her around. I’m not stalking her,” he hurried to add. “We just seem to go to a lot of the same places.”

Grinning, Rod said, “Then I believe some testing is in order. Can we get someone to observe her stealthily enough that they don’t need a veil? And then we can design a few tests before we approach her. An identity and contact information would be good, too.”

“I’m more worried about tracking this spell back to its source,” Palmer said, still glowing like a beacon. “I think I recognize some of the core magic here. It could be our friend Idris.”

“Isn’t that what you suspected?” Gwaltney said.

“We’ll keep an eye on that dealer and see if we can find out where he gets his stuff,” I promised. “But that fax machine in his office doesn’t give me a lot of hope of being able to follow him. He may just get the spells by fax and never sees who’s sendin’ them. I doubt there are any shady meetings in dark alleys. For now, we’d better brace ourselves for this spell hitting the streets on Saturday.”

“I’ll get a counterspell developed tonight and distributed to your people by morning,” Palmer said.

Gwaltney draped an arm across his friend’s shoulders. “And this is why we need to get you a girlfriend. You’re planning to spend Friday night working.”

“It’s a crisis!” Palmer protested. “Even if I had a girlfriend, I’d need to work tonight.”

“I gotta side with the kid here,” I said. “We need that counterspell. But I do agree that a girlfriend wouldn’t be a bad

idea. We really should investigate that immune.”

Blushing again, Palmer said. “On that, I agree. If she was able to foil a magical attack without knowing anything, imagine what she could do if she were in on the secret. We want her on our side.”

Rod grinned. “I’ll get to work on that, then. For you and for the good of the magical world.”

The End

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About this Series

You have just read *Criminal Enchantment*, a short story set in the world of Enchanted, Inc.

If you haven't read the Enchanted, Inc. Series already, read on for a peek at what happens soon after the events of this story. You can read the rest in the novel *Enchanted, Inc.*

Books in the Enchanted, Inc. Series:

1. *Enchanted, Inc.*
2. *Once Upon Stilettos*
3. *Damsel Under Stress*
4. *Don't Hex with Texas*
5. *Much Ado About Magic*
6. *No Quest for the Wicked*
7. *Kiss and Spell*
8. *Frogs and Kisses*

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An Excerpt from Enchanted, Inc.

I'd always heard that New York City was weird, but I had no idea just how weird until I got here. Before I left Texas to move here, my family tried to talk me out of it, telling me all sorts of urban legends about the strange and horrible things that happened in the big bad city. Even my college friends who'd been living in New York for a while told me stories about the weird and wonderful things they'd seen that didn't cause the natives to so much as blink. My friends joked that an alien from outer space could walk down Broadway without anyone looking twice. I used to think they were exaggerating.

But now, after having survived a year in the city, I still saw things every day that shocked and amazed me but didn't cause anyone else to so much as raise an eyebrow. Nearly naked street performers, people doing tap-dance routines on the sidewalk, and full-scale film productions—complete with celebrities—weren't worth a second glance to the locals, while I couldn't help but gawk. It made me feel like such a hick, no matter how hard I tried to act sophisticated.

Take this morning, for instance. The girl ahead of me on the sidewalk was wearing wings—those strap-on fairy wings people wear as part of a Halloween costume. Halloween was more than a month away, and while I couldn't afford designer fashions, I read enough fashion magazines to know that fairy wings were not a current fashion statement. She must be some neo-bohemian trendsetter from NYU, I thought, or maybe in the costume design program. She'd done a really good job on the wings because the straps were invisible, making it look like she had real wings. They even fluttered slightly, but that was probably just the wind

currents from walking.

I forced my attention away from Miss Airy Fairy to check my watch, then groaned. There was no way I'd make it to work on time if I walked, and my boss was usually lying in wait for me on Monday mornings, so I didn't dare come in even a minute late. I'd have to take the subway to work, even though it would take a precious two dollars off my MetroCard. I'd make up for it by walking home, I promised myself.

When I reached the Union Square station, I was surprised to see Miss Airy Fairy head down into the subway ahead of me instead of continuing toward the university. People who work downtown tend not to dress like that for work. As I followed her down the stairs, I noticed that she wore what must have been platform shoes with Lucite soles, which gave her the appearance of floating a couple of inches off the ground. She moved remarkably gracefully for someone wearing what had to be pretty clunky shoes.

As usual, no one on the platform gave her a second glance. I'd been here a year, and I'd yet to exchange one of those knowing "only in New York" glances with anyone. How could everyone be so jaded? Surely there were people around who were newer to the city than I was, and then there were the tourists, who were supposed to stare at everything.

But then I noticed a guy looking at Miss Airy Fairy. He didn't seem shocked or surprised, though. Instead, he smiled at her like he knew her. That in and of itself was odd because he didn't seem the type to spend his weekends wearing a cape and playing Middle Earth in Central Park. He looked like a typical Wall Street type, wearing a well-tailored dark suit and carrying a briefcase—the kind of Mr. Right that just about every career girl in New York hopes to snag. I'd guess he was a few years older than me, and he was quite good-looking, even if he was a little shorter than average.

Mr. Right (if he wasn't mine, he had to be somebody's) glanced at his watch, then up the tunnel, like he was looking for the next

train. He muttered something under his breath—probably something like “Where is that train?” or “I’m going to be late”—twitched his wrist, and next thing I knew, I heard the rumble that signaled an approaching train. If I didn’t know better, I would have thought he summoned it. I wasn’t complaining because I needed the train myself.

The waiting passengers shoved their way onto the train, then the conductor’s voice came over the PA system, saying, “Attention passengers. Due to a one time situation, this Brooklyn-bound N train will stop next at City Hall. If you need stops prior to this, please exit the train here and board an R train or another N train. Thank you.”

There was a chorus of mutters and groans as passengers poured out of the train. I took a now-empty seat and looked at my watch. At this rate I’d be early to work. This wasn’t a bad way to start the week.

Mr. Right was still on board, as was Miss Airy Fairy. Mr. Right exchanged a grin with the guy sitting next to me. I turned to look at that guy and then wondered if there was a polite way I could move to another seat without it being obvious that I was avoiding him.

He looked like the kind of guy who spends his lifetime defending against sexual harassment charges, the kind who thinks of himself as so irresistible that he can’t imagine his advances being unwanted. Unfortunately, that type is never as attractive as he’d like to think. This one wasn’t exactly hideous. With a little effort and the right personality he might not have been so bad. Unfortunately, he made no effort at all, so that his hair was poorly styled and greasy, while his skin would have made my mother, the Mary Kay representative, faint in horror. But he acted like he thought every woman on that train should be drooling over him, which made him even more unattractive to me.

The funny thing was, all the women on the train were looking at him over the tops of their books and newspapers like they

thought Pierce Brosnan had joined us on the subway car, and he grinned at them like he was totally used to that kind of attention. Maybe they could tell he was particularly well-endowed. Or maybe he was a famous rock star I didn't recognize. I wasn't hip enough to know what most rock stars looked like. He had the kind of smug slickness you'd expect from a famous rock star who didn't have to do anything to make women fall at his feet.

As for me, I'd rather look at Mr. Right, who was getting his fair share of admiring glances but who looked shy about it, not like he expected the attention. That made him infinitely cuter in my book.

"On your way to work?" Slick asked. It wasn't among the top five pickup lines I'd ever heard. Not that I heard a lot of them.

"Actually, I just like being crammed like sardines in an underground tin can to head to lower Manhattan in the morning," I said.

He stretched his arm out along the back of the seat, like he was angling to put his arm around me. I'm from a part of the world that still has drive-in movies, so I recognized the move and edged away as subtly as I could. "You're obviously not a native New Yorker," he said, oozing charm like my dad's old tractor oozes oil. "I love your accent."

Little did he know, but he wasn't paying me a compliment. As effective as the steel magnolia routine could be when I was asking for something or trying to get my way, it was a liability at work, where everyone seemed to think my Texas drawl meant I was dumber and less educated than they were. I'd been trying to lose my accent, but it kept slipping out when I was being particularly sarcastic. I guess I inwardly thought the drawl took the sting out of whatever ugly thing I'd just said. In this case, it seemed to have worked, just when I didn't want it to.

I wished I'd brought a book to bury my face in, but I'd planned to walk to and from work when I left the apartment, so I hadn't brought anything to read. In fact, the only things in my oh-so-professional-looking briefcase were my sack lunch and my dresser

shoes for the office. Instead, I just gave Slick a glare and turned my attention to Mr. Right. Maybe he'd have a Galahad complex and feel compelled to rescue me from the subway stalker.

Then I noticed that Slick was looking at Mr. Right as well, and suddenly his face was totally serious. Mr. Right, also serious, nodded his head slightly. Miss Airy Fairy was also staring at me. Now I couldn't help but wonder if this was a conspiracy. Were they going to rob me or try to scam me? Goodness knows, I might as well have been wearing a big yellow button saying "Hick from Out of Town! Please take advantage of me!"

Just then the door between cars opened and a giant chicken entered our car. To be more precise, it was a bored-looking man in a chicken suit—and how sad was it that he was more bored than embarrassed to be wearing that costume in public? I added to my mental list of jobs that were worse than mine. He shook a little plastic box in his left hand, and clucking sounds came out of it. I felt a pang of homesickness, for I used to have one like it on my desk back in Texas. I wouldn't dare put it on my desk here. It would only reinforce the hick stereotype. At the clucking sound, everyone looked up, reacted with mild amusement, then immediately went back to reading or avoiding eye contact. The chicken man then tried to hand flyers to everyone in the car. I hadn't yet learned the technique for avoiding flyers that most New Yorkers seem to have honed, so I took one from him. A new fried-chicken restaurant was opening, which gave me another moment of homesickness as I remembered family Sunday dinners. I tucked the flyer into my briefcase.

This incident didn't do much toward helping me understand New Yorkers. Fairy wings on the subway weren't worth noticing, but a guy in a chicken suit got a slight reaction. Both outfits involved wings. Why was one humdrum while the other was at least a little bit amusing? I noticed that Mr. Right had also taken a flyer. He was smiling and staring at the chicken man, which made me like him even more. Or, it would have if he didn't seem to be in

cahoots with the other two, who were still looking at me funny. I forgot about the giant chicken as I remembered why I felt ill at ease.



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About the Author



SHANNA SWENDSON earned a journalism degree from the University of Texas and used to work in public relations but decided it was more fun to make up the people she wrote about, so now she's a full-time novelist. She also writes the steampunk fantasy *Rebels* series and the contemporary fantasy *Fairy Tale* series. She lives in Irving, Texas, with several hardy houseplants and too many books to fit on the shelves.

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